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<td>Source</td>
<td>European Conference on Educational Research, Berlin, Germany, 12-16 September 2011</td>
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School Administrators’ Perceptions of Beginning Teachers’ Professional Readiness in Their First and Third Year of Service

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Networks: Teacher education research

Key words: teacher education, beginning teachers, school administrators, early career teachers

General description
This paper reports part of the results from a longitudinal study conducted to collect baseline information from student teachers about the initial teacher preparation programmes at the National Institute of Education, Singapore, and their initial years as beginning teachers in the Singapore school system. The first phase investigated why student teachers joined the teaching profession, their attitudes, and perceived knowledge and skill levels towards teaching at the beginning and end of the teacher preparation programme. Results for this phase have been reported in Wong, Chong, Choy, Wong, and Goh (2008), Lim-Teo, Low, Wong, and Chong (2008) and Chong, Wong, Choy, Wong, and Goh (2010).

The second phase of the study followed the teachers into their first and third year of teaching as beginning teachers. In these initial years, the perceptions of the school administrators of the professional readiness of the beginning teachers were captured. This paper will report the results of the perceptions of the school administrators.

The first years of teaching can be challenging and difficult. It is during this period that beginning teachers navigate to identify themselves professionally - in ways that see them coping with the tasks of teaching and responsibilities both inside and outside the classrooms within a system they may not be familiar with or thoroughly understand (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). Kevin Ryan (1986) described the first year as “the most turbulent, difficult, perplexing, frustrating and painful one in a young teacher’s life” (p. 3).
One source of insight into beginning teachers’ concerns is how stakeholders (principals, heads of department) perceive beginning teachers’ competence. Stakeholders’ perceptions of beginning teachers’ competence are integral to quality enhancement and to gain a comprehensive view of the accomplishments, challenges and issues of the initial years of teaching. Stakeholders’ perceptions of beginning teachers’ preparedness form an important focus that can be triangulated with other data and yield valuable information and insights into feedback on classroom performance and support for school teaching (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004; Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). This feedback will also provide a unique combination of insight and hindsight that teacher education programmes can draw from when making programme improvement decisions. However, there seems to be a lack of information on how stakeholders perceive beginning teachers’ competence even though it has been found that stakeholders’ perceptions may have effects on beginning teachers’ teaching and learning (Ballantyre, Thompson, & Taylor, 1998). Hence, the perception of stakeholders is thus worthy of greater attention.

The purpose of this paper is thus to examine school administrators’ perceptions of professional readiness of a cohort beginning teachers at the end of their first and third year of teaching, and to investigate the changes, if any, in their perceptions of their beginning teachers’ professional readiness.

Methodology

One school administrator from 172 primary and 175 secondary schools in Singapore were invited to give feedback via questionnaires on the professional readiness of the beginning teachers who were posted to their schools in their first and third year of service. The administrators comprised principals, vice principals, and department heads. Overall, 68 primary and 62 secondary school administrators completed the feedback questionnaire for both instances. Hence, the findings reported in this paper were based on the data collected from these 130 administrators. The overall return rate for this two year study is about 38%.

The questionnaires asked for school administrators’ perceptions of the beginning teachers’ professional readiness, preparedness to teach, the kinds of support provided by the school to the beginning teachers, and overall evaluation of the initial teacher preparation programme in preparing teachers for schools. For both questionnaires, the 12 items related to beginning teachers’ professional readiness were on a 5-point Likert scale. All other questions were open-ended to invite more in-depth feedback. The administrators were also invited to be interviewed by the researchers.

Besides the findings obtained from the 12 items in both questionnaires, representative quotes from the interviews will also be cited to support the statistical findings.

Results
The 12 quantitative items underwent exploratory factor analysis. Two factors were derived. One item which did not load well into either factor was eliminated. Factor One (Professionalism of the beginning teachers) comprised 7 items and Factor Two (Knowledge and skills related to teaching) 4 items. Each factor carried an eigenvalue >1.2. The loadings for all items in both factors were >= 0.40. Cronbach Alpha reliability tests showed that the questionnaire is fairly reliable (α = 0.89).

The school administrators’ responses at the end of the first and third year of teaching were examined. They rated Factor One at 3.93 and 4.07 and Factor Two at 3.81 and 4.04 at the end of first and third year respectively. On a 5-point Likert scale, these responses showed fairly positive perceptions from the administrators towards the beginning teachers’ professional readiness.

The administrators’ responses were also compared using pairwise t-tests. Results showed significant differences for both factors. They perceived that the beginning teachers’ professionalism (t = -2.78, p-value < 0.05) and their knowledge and skills (t = -4.37, p-value < 0.05) increased significantly from the first to the third year of teaching.

Representative interview quotes will be cited to support the above statistical findings.

REFERENCES


